

When he wouldn't leave, she did, took her winnings and earnings and caught a cab to The Tropicana.

## MIDNIGHT BLUES

Ellis Leahy pulled the strawberry shake down off the high-speed spindle a split second too soon and received a pink spray of sweet ice milk across the front of his shirt for the miscalculation. He cursed softly and snapped a plastic lid on the paper cup and turned around and slid the shake onto the counter. As he made change for the customer, a pimply-faced string-bean of a youth stepped up and said, "Hey man, there's somebody dead in your bathroom." Ellis closed his eyes, thought, Why does this shit always happen on my shift? and stepped through the kitchen, followed closely by his car-port girl, Kim Rubio. He exited the kitchen and entered the hallway that contained the restrooms. The teenaged messenger stood in the flickering fluorescent light on the chipped and curled-up linoleum and said with a deadpan monotone, "In there." Ellis looked the kid up and down and said, "What the hell were you doing in the ladies rest room?" The youth scowled and said, "I'm a girl." Ellis said, "Oh." Then he knocked on the door and called out, "Anybody in there?" "She's dead, asshole," the girl told him. "She's not gonna answer you." Kim Rubio laughed. The girl turned and pushed through the swinging door back into the restaurant's dining room, and Ellis pushed open the door of the tiny one-seater rest room.

Tired, drooping socks were visible under the graffiti-scribbled partition, and a pair of scuffed men's dress shoes. Ellis rapped on the stall door and received no answer. He turned to Kim and said, "You wanna crawl under there and unlock the door for me?" She crossed her arms and said, "No fucking way, man." So Ellis hunkered down and stuck his head and shoulder under the door and reached up and unlocked it. When he stood back up he asked Kim, "Who the hell is watching the car-port while you're fucking off in here?" She knew he was trying to get rid of her so she said, "Julio can handle it; don't worry." Ellis held onto the unlocked stall door. "How can he run the grill and the car-port at the same time?" "Would you open the God damned door," Kim snapped at her boss. Some old dead lady was not something that would blow Kim Rubio away. She hailed from Posole Town, Loma Alta's mean streets' barrio, where gunshots and mayhem were nightly affairs. When Ellis swung the door open, her only response was the two syllable, "Oh gross," with an accompanying wrinkle of the nose.

It was a bag lady, filthy and, in life, schizophrenic. She had been a regular customer at Loma Alta's coast route Burger 'N' Run, had been a vociferous believer in Jesus.



Now she was, presumably, with Him.

Kim said, "You sure she's dead?" She might be just sleepin'." Ellis touched the woman's shoulder and felt cold flesh beneath the tattered sweater. "Yeah," he said. "She's dead." "That's good," said Kim, "I don't think I'd wanna be doin' any CPR on her. She might have AIDS or syph or something." Ellis didn't say it, but he was feeling the same sense of relief. He swung the stall door shut and ushered Kim out of the bathroom. "Go get," he said to her as they entered the hallway, "that 'out of service' sign out of my office and hang it on the doorknob; I'll call the cops."

Carmen de la Cruz pulled the extra large L.A. Raiders sweat-shirt on over her bikini top, a pair of baggy jeans over the bottom. She banged out of the dressing room and breezed — with her thick black hair bouncing behind her — through the dim and smoky topless bar. She was eager to go; it had been a very tiring first night back on the job. Las Vegas had been nice: she'd picked up a wad there that had financed a six-week hiatus from dancing — but now that money was gone. The lure of a steady tax-free income — a reasonably large income — had finally pulled her back into the Man-Trap.

Her calves ached as she clipped across the parking lot, as did her buttocks and her lower back. She would need ibuprofen and a six-pack. But she realized as she jounced her Camero out of the driveway and onto the coast route, that she would have to pee before she hit the Seven-Eleven for the pain relief supplies. She had guzzled, her first day back on the job, a gallon and a half of Diet Pepsi, and what she hadn't sweated out on the stage had filtered through her system and seeped into her bladder, where the stinging sensation was becoming urgent.

Carmen decided on the Burger 'N' Run. She could pick up a burger when she was done with their rest room, a big quarter pounder to soak up the beer.

She dashed across the parking lot and slipped so quickly inside that Ellis, who was standing behind the counter waiting for the cops, was unable to intercept her. "Rest room is out of order," he called to her as she pushed through the swinging door into the hallway. She ignored him, and she ignored the sign on the door, too. This was an emergency. A little addition to the stinking water sitting in a stopped-up toilet wouldn't make much difference.

The woman had been leaning toward a fall. The very slight vacuum caused by the rapid opening of the stall door finalized gravity's chore. The dead head bounced off Carmen's abdomen before it rang to on the floor. Carmen apologized



profusely and tried to help the woman up before she realized that she was dead

With the willies making her arms writhe like snakes, Carmen ran from the restaurant, her face an ugly, horror-induced contortion, her urine staining a dark hand on her jeans.

#### ELLIS WINDS DOWN AFTER THE NIGHT SHIFT

Ellis pulled into his driveway and trudged into the house with his shirttail hanging out. He fixed himself a cup of decaf; it was six-thirty in the morning and in an hour or two he was going to sack out; he didn't need any caffeine tickling the back of his brainstem. He took his steaming cup out into the back yard. He was going to sit down at the picnic table and enjoy the sunrise, but when he heard rustling on the other side of the fence he went to check it out. It was Clete, pattering in his flip-flops in his garden, pulling snails off his pepper plants and dropping them into a bucket. "What are you doin', partner?" Ellis said. Clete pointed to the soup he was making in his plastic bucket: "Salt water," he said grinning. "It's eating those nasty motherfuckers up." Ellis laughed and said, "What a sadistic bastard." Clete said, "Yeah? Well you ought to see what those little fuckers'll do to a baby pepper plant." Clete was close to his jalapenos.

Ellis invited Clete over for coffee, fortified with Ten High bourbon. They sat at the picnic table, talking. "I gotta get off this midnight shift, Clete," Ellis signed. Clete blew some steam off the top of his coffee and said, "I wish I could get off the damned disability. Doin' nothin' every day, I'm startin' to feel like a damned slug."

Next door, in the bucket sitting on the lawn at the edge of the garden, the salty water bubbled. The little pepper plants stretched their leaves out to the rising sun.

#### CLETE'S NEW DANCE STEP

A few years back, when Clete was recovering from his stroke, he got very involved in his garden, limping around his twenty square foot of bare dirt in the back yard with a quad cane in one hand and a hoe or hand spade clasped in the other, involved in the pastime of raising dry and deformed zucchinis and mealy tomatoes, stunted bell peppers and potatoes the size of golf balls. His one unqualified success, though, was his little plot of twelve plants — laid out in a grid pattern configuration in the garden's southeast corner — that produced a prodigious supply of big glossy jalapeno